

Songs of Zubeen Garg: An Eco-critical Reading

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Article Info

Received: 16 Apr 2026,

Received in revised form: 12 May 2026,

Accepted: 16 May 2026,

Available online: 20 May 2026

Keywords— ecological concerns, eco-criticism, man and environment, songs

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Abstract

Drawing on theoretical underpinnings of eco-criticism, the study is a critical reading of the ecologically informed songs of Zubeen Garg (a cultural icon of Assam, 1972-2025) to examine if the select songs, with their strong rootedness in Assam (India's Northeast) are purely mimetic exercises or if they form a critique ecological concerns that shape them. Though his songs are devoid of artistic elitism, yet they are more than a melody. A number of songs in his discography are evocative of the inter-relationship of man , environment and his identity as an Assamese. Songs featured in the study are chosen because along with environmentalist cause, they constitute a critique of the status quo with a call for protection and preservation of our ecosystem and its justice. Apart from scripting the ecological concerns in the select songs/lyrics, sources from certain video clips, newspapers based on his interviews are also consulted for a comprehensive understanding on the way he becomes a metaphor of a collective psyche of the Assamese community for preservation and protection of its eco-system.

I. INTRODUCTION

Drawing on the theoretical underpinnings of eco-criticism, the study is a critical reading of the ecologically informed songs of Zubeen Garg (a cultural icon of Assam, 1972-2025) to examine if the select songs, with their strong rootedness in Assam (India's Northeast) are purely mimetic exercises or if they form a critique on complex socio-cultural, political and ecological issues that shape them. Though his songs are devoid of artistic elitism, yet they are more than a melody. A number of songs in his discography are evocative of the inter-relationship of man , environment and his identity as an Assamese. Songs featured in the study are chosen because along with environmentalist cause, they constitute a critique of the status quo with a call for protection and preservation of our ecosystem and its justice. Apart from scripting the

ecological concerns in the select songs/lyrics, sources from certain video clips, newspapers based on his interviews are also consulted for a comprehensive understanding on the way he becomes a metaphor of a collective psyche of the Assamese community for preservation and protection of its eco-system. The study is based on the selected songs /lyrics of Zubeen and occasional statements made by the artist in interviews of media persons. Literary analysis of his songs is undertaken to develop an ecological consciousness by adopting an interdisciplinary framework.

Zubeen is the next most powerful cultural icon in the new millennium in Assam after Bhupen Hazarika. Songs randomly chosen in the study are woven into the concerns that draw ecological conscience of his fans ,music critics and general public. Those songs build up a bridge that connects humans

with nature (including other than humans). Music and songs serve as a medium to situate the voice of protest/dissent against every kind of injustice, corruption, intolerance to the humanity and physical environment as they do not constitute a neutral field. He is always impatient with the political regimes that revolve round the metaphors of "Jati, Mati, Bhethi" for restoration of the interconnection of land and its people in Assam. He is the soul of Assamese music, a bridge between tradition and modernity who passionately loves humans and the non-humans alike by being entrenched in the soil of Assam. In a 2018 interview, he said that "our rivers are our veins, when they bleed, so do we" (Sarma, October 22, 2025). For him art is nothing but a weapon to withstand ecological crisis which teaches us to consider environmental activism as inseparable from the process of cultural survival.

II. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Biographical details of his family inform that he moved frequently from one place to the other in his native place due to father's job as a magistrate thereby exposing the young boy to diverse sounds, sights, flora and fauna. His family had ancestral roots in Tamulichiga (Jhanji) in Jorhat. He pursued his primary education at Carmel School there. In J.B. College, Jorhat, he studied science at Higher Secondary level. Remembering Zubeen after his death, Jadav Payeng¹ reminisces: "I first met Zubeen when he was a student at J.B. College in Jorhat. He would often cycle to the Brahmaputra sandbars near Kokilamukh, close to my home. Sitting on the sands, he'd hum quietly to himself and even then, music flowed naturally from him" (The Assam Tribune, 22 October 2022). Thus, he became enthralled with the pristine beauty of the river as a teenager and the young Zubeen sang songs that are melodic and romantic but devoid of ideological sophistication. During the later years when he grows up as a matured artist, he sang songs like "Majulir ejoni Sowali dukh paley" where the delicate river island Majuli became a metaphor against utter negligence and indifference to our tangible and intangible heritage. The forlorn girl brought up in Majuli

feels heartbroken. The profound emotional loss is caused by the slow erosion in the landscape of the river island along with its vanishing glory of the hidden heritage (tangible and intangible) drawing our attention to the preservation and conservation. The narrative of cultural and ecological vulnerabilities of the islanders are brought to the fore in the song. Her broken heart is symbolic of the ethical reminder to us for addressing the issues like the gradual shrinkage of the island by annual floods and erosion, vanishing cultural legacy and the status of its indigenous people as ecological refugees. As an insider of Majuli, the girl is a repository of the ecological oral history of the people who have been there for ages by adopting their own survival mechanisms. The anonymous girl is the eyewitness to the changing landscape of Majuli due to anthropogenic forces that I discuss in the following section.

From pre-colonial to colonial time, the island had been a vast swamp with fields and habitations extended here and there. It means that the island remained unaffected by any embankment activities. But during postcolonial period, the ecology stood as a technological problem demanding quick response of infrastructural intervention and thus it became vulnerable to steady disasters. Both state and non-state actors and technologies for withstanding flood and erosion control result in disaster. To those actors, the ecology of Majuli and its protection requires a response to "technological problem" (Plumwood 105) and thus a myth of human autonomy is automatically constructed. The slow nature of everyday erosion in the island and washing away of the embankments fail to draw serious attention from the policy makers due to the visual challenges posed by slow violence. The crisis becomes acute over time. This is why, Neil Smith (2006) argues that "There is no such thing as a natural calamity" and the flood and river erosion in Majuli are due to the increase of "human made disasters" (Basu & Kapuria 1986) like floods, earthquakes, cyclones, deforestation, etc.

By adopting own survival strategies, the issue of displacement in the island has not drawn significant attention of the state and this

issue among many remains unheard in the song. The displaced become self rehabilitated and hence it creates less burden on the part of the state. Though this is one justification to resolve the issue, yet Zubeen does not forget to imply the state's negligence and indifference. A series of slow processes (flood and erosion) create a catastrophic impact on the landscape as a whole. Added to it are the new pressures of industrialization and urbanization. "khohonia" (riverbank erosion) in the song can also be extended to refer to the *chaporis* of the island that are vanishing. The history of the island informs us that those *chaporis* became the reservoirs of variety of crops like *matimah* (black gram), *kosu* (colocasia), garlic etc. The Grasslands- the pasture commons that were part and parcel of the island's ecosystem gradually vanished. It is true that the geography of Majuli is constructed by the *chaporis* and *beels* that are recognized as sandy and swampy ecologies that are now in danger with a signal to the unpredictable crisis of the ecosystem.

Flood and erosion have been made more disastrous by the combined powers of biophysical and anthropogenic forces leading to the changing nature of these events. The song evokes the emotion that the anthropogenic forces like the hydraulic infrastructure and onslaughts of capitalism pose risk to cultural continuity and ecological resilience. The steady depletion of its ecosystem endanger aquatic life. Memory of the indigenous people of the island holds the knowledge that the wetland ecology of the island (*beel*, *suti*, *pitoni*, *noloni*, *doloni* etc) are partly natural and partly the creations of human intervention for construction of embankments. Due to embankments, the annual flood fails to enter into the *beels* and hence, it turns into *pitoni*. This is one of the explanations. Ideally speaking, *pitonis* are the habitats of birds and reptiles. In course of time, *pitoni* or wetlands may turn into grazing space or land for cultivation and ultimately their wetland features perish due to human intervention (again an anthropogenic force). *Noloni* is another habitat for the herbivores such as buffaloes, wild elephants and rhinos. Human encroachment like digging private fishery also adds to the disappearance of the wetlands. It is to be admitted that the wetlands

of the river island form an umbilical cord used to connect the mighty Brahmaputra with the island ecologies for ages. The riverside villages and the *satras* are also disappearing because of human made disasters and the entire landscape is fast changing.

The song aims to address these concerns discussed above. At the Zubeen concerns with a melancholia caused by nostalgia which is connected with the breakdown of the normal relationship that exists between their psychic identity and their home. It is true that those people are not forcibly displaced from their native hearth. Their place based distress is connected with powerlessness that is nothing but an environmental injustice perpetrated on them. The natives of the island fail to get solace or comfort from their close proximity with home at present. The melancholia or frustration of the lonely girl in the song is caused by *solastalgia* which "is the pain or sickness caused by the loss or lack of solace and the sense of isolation connected to the present state of one's home and territory" (Albrecht 45). What is required for restoration of the ecosystem of Majuli is the collective action for solace and communion in its environment. The causes of *solastalgia* are both natural and artificial. Flood and erosion result in *solastalgia*. The song critiques the role of the state and various political/economic forces at play that cause gradual devastation of the island. Apart from being the "Cultural Capital" of Assam, Majuli consists of a large, spindle shaped landmass and dozens of smaller islands, known locally as *chaporis* or *chars*. Changing course of the river Brahmaputra makes and remakes these *chars*/*chaporis* every year by projecting the transient nature of the river island which is similar to the Sunderbans resonated in Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004): "But here in the tide country, transformation is the rule of life: rivers stray from week to week, and islands are made and unmade in days" (Ghosh 224). The island was predominantly rural and became the home to diverse ethnic communities: the Mishing (dominant community), caste Hindus, Kacharis, Deoris, people of Nepali origin. It is "also the nerve centre of the *satras*, medieval-era Vaishnavite monasteries, that have significantly influenced

the socio-cultural and spiritual landscape of Assam" (Baruah 122). The song talks about the shrinkage of the island due to erosion (gora khohoniya) and the lost glory of the island. This sense of solastalgia makes the anonymous girl grief-stricken. The song is a protest against the violence of the ecosystem of Majuli that reminds us to save it from environmental injustices. By the image of a forlorn girl, the composer/singer andromorphosises the river island.

Epistemologically speaking, the idea of Majuli is also a construct of various recent discourses. Neo-Vaishnavism and the contemporary revival of religious politics in the country produce a narrative that the island is a destination for spiritual illumination. Along with it, the state views it as a top tourist destination in Assam and this re-branding of the island as a tourist spot has been a part of global discourse on ecotourism and nature. Thus the operation of a capitalist market in its neoliberal garb is at play. Citing Michael Watts, Nixon states that we need to seriously address the "violent geographies of fast capitalism" (Nixon 7-8) that can cause slow violence with delayed effects to the hotspot of capitalism (here Majuli). The song responds to various discourses produced to undermine the real issues of this nature's wonderland. It is more painful to hear that the people migrated from the island to safe haven are also the active contributors to this discourse in reshaping Majuli, both culturally, spiritually or economically. The song if critically analyzed, refers to physical transformations of the river island through flood, erosion and human intervention and also the reconstruction of the idea of Majuli (spiritually/culturally) beyond its original location. The displacement of the people from their land and changing landscape of the island also result in erosion of cultural tradition and indigenous epistemology handed down to the inhabitants from their ancestors. This is an epistemic violence against the indigenous knowledge system of the people who have still been maintaining a physical and an emotional bonding with the land and its geography in Majuli. The making and unmaking of Majuli is as much about the material transformation of the landscape through

processes of flood, erosion and human intervention against which Zubeen expressed his concerns in the song. The postcolonial state expedites the processes of reproduction of disasters in Majuli. In his doctoral thesis "Dreams and Disasters on the Banks of the Brahmaputra: Dwelling and Aspiration in Majuli, Northeast India", Boyd is of the opinion that "Popular representations of the riverine district of Majuli in Assam, Northeast India, oscillate between depictions of a calm spiritual hub and as a land possessing a bleak and melancholic future owing to annual inundation and riverbank erosion" (9).

The human - nature symbiosis through the image of a girl crying for help and letting others to listen to the causes of her grief is brought to the fore with a romantic vein. The anonymous girl can be supposed to belong to Mishing indigenous community who maintains an inherently harmonious relationship with the land and natural environment since time immemorial. This is evident from the reference to *Oi Nitom* (a folk song of the Mising tribe who used to live on the bank of the Brahmaputra). The song also draws on the folk legacies of the Missing tribe, an indigenous community who have a strong emotional bonding with the land. It carries forward the nuances of oral tradition in terms of mnemonic representation by indulging in the exercise of reviving receding landscape by retrieving the folk "*Oi Nitom*." Baruah states that "One of the most common sights in the countryside of Majuli is of Mising women fishing in the shallow waters of the island's abundant low-lying areas, using indigenous gears such as *saloni* ...or *jakoi*... and often accompanied by the melody of an *Oi Nitam* (Missing folk song) (Baruah pp.94-95). Their indigenous living style is inseparable from the land they are inhabiting. Fishing is also a community sport for those people. It delineates subjective interactions and encounters with the lived experiences of geo-historical and geopolitical spaces essentially linked with land which is not only a source of their sense of belonging but also a part of their cultural pedagogy. The girl tries to communicate or share something important but the singer as a persona admits that no one is there to listen to her suggesting a widespread apathy or wilful

ignorance resonated with the prevailing socio-political and environmental climate in contemporary Assam. The call through her soulful song is again a call to the others for activities to save the future i.e. ecological restoration as well as the preservation of tangible(the Sattras, Namghars, Masks) and intangible heritage(Bhaonas, Raas Leela) of the river island. The song, undoubtedly, invites all for a collective action for a green future in Majuli.

Sometimes, people share wisdom about the river and its intricate ecologies that are always beyond the grasp of the state actors. The song informs us that the river island is very delicate and it should be touched with love. The profundity of the seemingly simple statement "***sui sale sui sale sui sale bujiba***" makes us awestruck. While the river engineering considers rivers as entities that can be harnessed, tamed, and altered at will, the above line reminds us of the living entity a river is- a delicate being that deserves love, not techno-engineering. For ages, the islandness of Majuli has established a strong social tie among different sections of the people as well as between government officials and the people. Such kind of mutual interdependence is a challenge for communities to raise voice against the state. Unveiling the disastrous state in Majuli requires paying special attention to both the capitalist state as well as the everyday state.

Majuli is also commoditised as has already been mentioned. The age old rich traditional crafts(pottery, weaving, mask making) and unique Sattra culture are now attractions for tourism. There is a growing tension between traditional livelihood opportunities and new economic prospects. Development strategies of the state intrude the spaces of the local people depriving them of their traditional sources of occupation and this happens in Majuli. Zubeen makes a rallying cry against the fear of disfiguration of Majuli and he is embarrassed with the twin processes of flooding and river bank erosion that have continuously been reshaping the landscape of Majuli by causing tremendous damage to local ecologies and livelihoods. He does not ignore the political and economic forces. During the North

East Festival in New Delhi, Zubeen along with Papon² and Adil Hussain³ made an appeal to people to save Majuli from its imminent threat. This call is significant in the city of Delhi in two ways: (a) it draws attention to the intervention of the centre for a collective effort to save the island and (b) this call is a reminder to the people of the globe for their ethical responsibility to protect the river island. The song is resonated with Majuli's continual shrinking by floods thereby increasing vulnerability of the local people. By turning emotion into melody without having any formal training, Zubeen gave voices of those who lived in the river island for years. The song projects an awareness of the threats of ecological degradation faced by the island and the anxiety these threats have produced amongst the local people. It can be argued that "... the ethnic communities of the Northeast are often termed as 'ecosystem people' owing to their symbiotic relationship with their natural surroundings" (Bargohain & Punekar, 2).

Spatial imagery (Doria Ghat) in the song refers to a wetland that serves as a vital habitat for sustaining diverse array of aquatic flora and fauna. The song finds an absence of the management of the site by pollution control and regulation of water levels under the aegis of the government to preserve the vital ecosystem. The spirit of Majuli and the flows of the Brahmaputra weave together an emotional bond to signify the relationship of the people with their land. As structural and cultural spaces, the Vaishnavite Satras and the Namghars made great contributions to the socio-cultural milieu of Majuli. The Satras and Namghars are part of the cultural history and also have mnemonic associations with the community that is reflected in the song. Kamalabari Ghat is the largest port of the Island and if one wants to go there, people have to spend rupees ten " Doh toka, doh toka, doh taka ferriery re..." . The need to travel by ferry to reach the 'mystic land' is stated in the song.

As an act of resistance to the misplaced priorities of the satras and satradhikars are challenged by Zubeen in one of his stage performances in Majuli. For him, the satradhikars should divert their attention to the disasters that has been a threat to the

diverse communities and the land instead of being engaged with the rituals like paalnaam, raas leela etc. The singer thus calls the island as the " ecological landscape of resistance " (Guha 6) leading to the management of it by indigenous system for preservation.

"Mayabini Ratir Bukut"(another song) is an evocation of a sense of nostalgia and emotional bonding with the place. The song's theme of longing and remembrance is a retelling of the environmental loss and disruption of cultural continuity within one's land. Like Shelley's wild winds, Zubeen too danced with storms considering this force as a malevolent aspect of Nature in his lyric " Dhumuhar xote mur bahu jugare nachon.." (I danced for ages with the storms). The human and the non human here form a compatible relationship with each other. There is the Freudian idea of repressed romantic unconsciousness as the song is a romantic track. The non-human other with Anthropogenic biasness turns into an emotional communication between man and the world of nature. Eco-critics like Bate, McKusick et al argue that artistic creativity is always intertwined with human desires that find manifestations in dreams and visions and it justifies use of Silaa (Kite) in the song " Silaa, Silaa Moi". In this song, the human and the non- human is in a balanced state initially but at the end, the singer admits the more powerful status of the non-human. Through the images of storms and kite , Zubeen subverts the more authoritative position of the humans towards treatment of the non-humans. It is interesting to note that humans and the non-humans are situated in an equal plane by Zubeen. Shelley's invocation of the west wind as more powerful is reversed in " Dhumuhar xote mur bahu jugare nachon". By doing so, he acknowledges his capacity to construct a new space for negotiation with the nature or other than human world by deconstructing the myth of humanist ideology. The song does not place dominance of the storms over humans , rather it erases the accepted notion of power that exists between the human and the non-human world. Another song " Rod...Rod Aji Keni Pau" is an emotional turmoil in the mind of the singer. Here emotional fragmentation is caused

by social and environmental instability. In another song " Politics Nokoriba Bondhu" the singer urges his friend not to do politics . He says that he hums the songs of Jati (community) and land. The lyric is a strong indictment to the politicians for their exploitation of Jati, Mati, Bheti along with various ethnic communities/tribes in the state. The song is a warning against the political ideologies that divide people by making the common people fools. The line " Jaati Maatir Gaan Gungunau" (I sing songs of our land and our people, don't use politics to tear apart the society, my friend). He belonged to nature finding his spirit amidst greens and blues of the earth, amidst chirps and tails and everything that screamed of the natural world.

In many situations, either on stage or beyond, people discover him showing anger and defiance against actions of the government in the name of development for cutting down trees. He speak against animal sacrifice in religious rituals or strongly fights against the Govt. plan to cut down the trees near Dighalipukhuri in Guwahati. In the article " Zubeen redefined coexistence, humanism " Hoque stated that " His love for Nature was profound; he treated trees, rivers and animals as his family. When the Government planned to cut down trees near Dighalipukhuri , he personally led the protest, saving them (*The Assam Tribune, dtd 6th Novemebr, Guwahati*). He was always unyielding when it came to truth and justice. He would fight alongside people's movements to save trees for protecting ecological balances. Advocacy for the rights of animals and against their sacrifice is his strong steps.

It is worth mentioning that videos and images on popular social media immediately after his sudden demise made us believe how he used to maintain a close tie with other than humans. During the days of the last journey of this singer, social media images witnessed heartbreaking scenes of the animals in front of the homage stand of Zubeen. In one of his interviews, he once narrated why his home state is famous for: " Assam is famous for Tea, Rhinos and Zubeen Garg". In a nutshell, it is nothing but an evocation of the inter-relationship of man , environment and his identity as an Assamese. But what I find

genuinely interesting here is how the public persona of Zubeen Garg seamlessly translated as "I" in the public sphere can easily be attributed to his musical expression of the desire for the collective self of Assamese for their own land and echo-heritage.

III. CONCLUSION

Songs and activism of Zubeen analyzed in the study carry on a fight for social and environmental justice stating that the land of Assam is our song.. After his death, it looked as if the rivers, hills, flora and fauna, forests have lost their most eloquent storyteller. He hopes for a utopian future. Disruption of nostalgia for his homeland and environment results in a strong "solastalgia"(cited in Chang 130) as coined by Glenn A. Albrecht(2019) in the lyrics studied here. The term in the context of the song "Majulir ejoni Sowali dukh paley" implies emotional turmoil, untold sufferings experienced by the people of Majuli due to changing ecological concerns worsening their habitat. The other songs studied here also justify the ethical responsibility of the humans towards our non-human counterparts.

NOTES

1. Padma Shri awardee known across the country as the " Forest Man of India". He was born in Jorhat, Assam
2. Angaraag Mahanta known by his stage name as Papon is an Indian playback singer and composer from Assam. He is one of the contemporary folk fusion artists modernizing and popularising modern Assamese music.
3. An internationally acclaimed actor born in Goalpara, Assam. He also remains deeply connected to Indian cinema including Bollywood and regional films.
4. *Jakoi* is a triangular pouch of bamboo mating used in shallow water .*Saloni* is a circular filtering trap made of bamboo
5. Geo-bags are small containers filled with sand or soil, used to control erosion.

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